

Black Militants Jolt New Politics Convention

Harvey Robb

Convening in Chicago's Palmer House, one of America's plushest (and whitest) hotels, the National Conference on New Politics brought black militants and much of the white left into occasional dialogue and frequent chaos.

The New Politics convention assembled an unprecedented array of strange bedfellows under one roof. Before the convention ended, white Mississippians called for Black Power, Jews condemned "Zionist imperialism," a couple of nuns endorsed the Newark conference resolutions (which characterized Christianity as a slave religion) and as usual the minuscule Ad-Hoc Committee for a Marxist-Leninist Vanguard in America denounced almost everyone.

It is difficult to assess the coalition which emerged during the week; an evaluation will be possible only when local groups attempt to relate to the national programs.

BLACK MILITANTS

The two major conflicts which dominated the Convention were between black militants and whites, and between proponents of community-oriented organizing and people who wanted to emphasize electoral politics.

Black people at the convention were determined as never before to participate completely and unequivocally on their own terms.

The Black Caucus which formed in Chicago stated that black people would be seated on two conditions:

- 1) that white people accept thirteen points (which the Black Caucus reserved sole right to amend or "refine"
- 2) that the Black Caucus be given votes equal in number to all the white votes at the convention. Both of these demands were passed by a sizable majority of white voters, but it was a bitter pill for some people to swallow.

"ZIONIST IMPERIALISM"

Included in the thirteen points was a condemnation of "wars of Zionist imperialism" and a demand that white people set up "civilizing committees" in white communities. These two points were the most controversial. Organizers in poor white communities indicated that it would be difficult to gain local supporters by advertising that white radicals had come into the neighborhood to "civilize" them.

The Black Caucus, as one black woman put it, set the demands as a "barometer" to see where white people were at, and white people responded (not without pause) by accepting the demands. The decision had, I think, both positive and negative aspects. For the first time in a large national meeting leftists acknowledged that the black movement speaks with more potential power than the present white movement and the day when white people call the shots has long passed.

But it was an unhealthy situation in so far as white people voted for things they didn't believe in. Many Jewish radicals who do not believe in the existence of "Zionist imperialism" voted to condemn it. Some white people argued that what black people wanted was a "symbolic" demonstration of white seriousness and that the "spirit" of their demands overshadowed the letter.

There is some truth in this characterization. Certainly black people have suffered a history of betrayal by alleged white allies and had a perfect right to demand verbal assurance that white people meant business. Nevertheless, coalitions cemented with symbolic gestures rather than genuine self-interest and power rarely weather difficult times. At any rate, the Black Caucus seemed jubilant when the long debate ended in an impressive victory for the demands of black people.

LOCAL ORGANIZING

The convention was deeply split on the issues of local organizing and electoral politics. Everyone agreed that local organizing was crucial; but some argued that electoral politics is the perfect compliment to local efforts while others viewed elections as antithetical to local work, draining energy and resources away from the community. Some of the local organizers (including much of SDS at the convention) felt strongly that it was premature to talk about electoral politics because white radicals had no organized base which could coalesce with the black movement; emphasis, therefore, should be on creating that base.

Some radicals who have carried out a number of electoral experiments (Berkeley-Oakland CNP for instance) felt a need to consolidate disparate campaigns under a unified independent Presidential ticket. A small minority argued that such consolidation could provide the basis for a third party in the near future.

It became evident during the debate that the movement was at very different stages of development in different areas, and a "California compromise" was worked out. Those states in which electoral politics is very advanced will come together in a convention to discuss the possibilities of accepting a common Presidential third ticket and program. In areas where community organizing has begun or is needed, New Politics groups will provide resources and direction for expanding local programs (perhaps on the model of the Chicago Organizers School). The Black Caucus called for two committees equally divided between blacks and whites to implement the two differing perspectives, and this structure was adopted by the Convention.

VARIETY OF SPEAKERS

During the week the Convention was addressed by a host of prominent national figures, including King, Spock, McKissick, Bond, Gregory, William Pepper, James Forman, and Robert Scheer. In general these speakers tended to give excellent rally speeches (especially the militant and moving report on Africa and SNCC by James Forman). But most of the national figures abstained from offering a clear political perspective for the near future and few indicated where their organizations stood in relation to New Politics. This lack of clarity may have contributed to some of the confusion at the Convention.

At this point, it is premature to judge the events in Chicago and the national coalition formed there. The crucial test will come when local New Politics groupings attempt to unite local organizing efforts or to seek a 1968 Presidential alternative to Louis Abolofia.

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